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The New Nuclear Threat Hair-Trigger Missiles Risk Catastrophic Terrorism

Hair-Trigger Nukes Risk Catastrophic Terrorism

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While the efforts of the U.S. government to assist Russia in preventing the theft of nuclear materials from storage sites and research institutes have been inadequate, the opportunities for nuclear terrorism presented by U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert represent an even greater peril that receives even less attention and effort. In an era of potential nuclear terrorism, the theft of a nuclear weapon from a storage site could spell an eventual disaster for an American city, but the seizure of a strategic missile or group of missiles ready for immediate firing could be apocalyptic for entire nations.

Our two governments have not yet overcome the mutual suspicion that is severely impeding their cooperation in preventing nuclear materials theft. They had better leap this hurdle soon, because even greater cooperation is necessary to protect their populations against the multitude of potential terrorist threats to launch-ready nuclear forces.

The distrust stems partially from disputes such as the Iraq war, but it persists in large part because the United States and Russia remain in each other's nuclear cross-hairs. War planners in both countries remain, believe it or not, preoccupied with preparing to fight a large-scale nuclear war with each other on short notice. Both sides keep thousands of weapons aimed at each other and poised for immediate launch. U.S. spy planes still routinely lurk off the Russian border looking for holes in the air defense network through which U.S. heavy bombers and cruise missiles could fly to drop nuclear bombs on Russia in wartime. Russian missile submarines still find themselves trailed by U.S. submarines as soon as they leave port on patrol. Two massive leadership posts inside mountains in the Urals built to withstand a U.S. nuclear strike are just coming online. Russia is equipping the one at Kozvinsky Mountain with an underground antenna for radioing a launch order to a "dead hand" communications rocket designed to

ensure quasi-automatic Russian missile retaliation in the event of a U.S. strike that decapitates the nuclear chain of command.

It behooves the former enemies to kick these old habits and stand down their obsolete confrontation. Nuclear terrorism is the real enemy, and fostering cooperation in tackling it requires that both countries move away from their nuclear confrontation. Taking U.S. and Russian missiles off of hair-trigger alert, moreover, would itself automatically reduce if not remove many of the biggest terrorist threats—which stem largely stem from the extremely high launch-readiness of strategic missiles. Both U.S. and Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles remain fueled, targeted, and waiting for a couple of computer signals to fire. They fly the instant they receive these signals, which can be sent with a few keystrokes on a launch console.

What kind of terrorist threats? The most obvious is the loss of physical control over such missiles. If scores of armed Chechen rebels could slip into the heart of Moscow and hold a packed theater hostage for days, could terrorists infiltrate missile fields in rural Russia, seize control over a nuclear-armed mobile rocket roaming the countryside, and launch it at Europe or America? It's an open question that warrants candid bilateral discussion of the prospects of terrorists capturing rockets and circumventing the safeguards designed to foil their illicit firing.

Another specter concerns terrorists spoofing radar or satellite sensors, or cyber-terrorists hacking into early warning networks. Could sophisticated terrorists generate false indications of an enemy attack that results in a mistaken launch of nuclear rockets in 'retaliation?' False alarms have been frequent enough on both sides under the best of conditions. False warning poses an acute danger as long as Russian and U.S. nuclear commanders are allowed, as they still are today, only several pressure-packed minutes to determine whether an enemy attack is underway and decide whether to retaliate. Russia's deteriorating early warning network coupled to terrorist plotting against it only heightens the risks.

Russia is not the only crucible of risk. The early warning and control problems plaguing Pakistan, India, and other nuclear proliferators are even more acute. As

these nations move toward hair-trigger stances for their nuclear missiles, the terrorist threat to them will grow in parallel.

In addition, U.S. nuclear control is also far from fool-proof. For example, a Pentagon investigation of nuclear safeguards conducted several years ago made a startling discovery—terrorist hackers might be able to gain back-door electronic access to the U.S. naval communications network, seize control electronically over radio towers such as the one in Cutler, Maine, and illicitly transmit a launch order to U.S. Trident ballistic missile submarines armed with 200 nuclear warheads apiece. This exposure was deemed so serious that Trident launch crews had to be given elaborate new instructions for confirming the validity of any launch order they receive. They would now reject a firing order that previously would have been immediately carried out.

If Russian and U.S. experts could instill trust in each other, then they could identify the real deficiencies in the system of early warning and control over nuclear forces on high combat alert. They could also allay unwarranted fears. The value of trust was illustrated two years ago when Russian scientists at the renowned Kurchatov Institute alerted their American counterparts in the Department of Energy to software flaws they feared had compromised the U.S. computer system used to keep track of the U.S. inventory of nuclear materials.

The stakes today are too high to let old habits of mind and obsolete practices of nuclear confrontation stand in the way of protecting ourselves against the biggest threat faced by both the United States and Russia. Washington and Moscow need to stop playing Cold War-like games and confront nuclear terrorism instead. Both need ironclad safeguards against the terrorist exploitation of their hair-trigger arsenals. They should each stand down, and work together not only to protect their own arsenals but also to keep other nations off of high alert, before it's too late.

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